



Perspective

Opportunities and barriers to alternative livestock production in the Kingston, Ontario region

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Abstract

Alternative livestock production is an important transition away from industrialized livestock production and towards more sustainable systems. However, even in areas well suited to alternative livestock production, non-industrial producers continue to struggle to make ends meet. This perspective piece examines the livelihood challenges facing alternative livestock producers in the Kingston, Ontario region based upon key informant interviews with farmers and other key stakeholders. Our

findings demonstrate that a decline in the number of provincial processing facilities and poorly scaled regulations are key barriers for producers, while current systems of value are also misaligned. These problems have persisted for many years and need urgent policy attention. We conclude by discussing potential solutions such as mobile abattoirs and increasing technical and marketing support.

Keywords: Alternative food systems; farmer livelihoods; food policy; livestock production

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Résumé

Transformer l'élevage est un élément important de la transition entre la production industrielle et des systèmes plus durables. Cependant, même dans des régions particulièrement propices aux productions animales alternatives, les producteurs non industriels peinent encore à joindre les deux bouts. Cet article « Perspective » examine les difficultés de subsistance que connaissent les éleveurs adoptant des méthodes différentes dans la région de Kingston, en Ontario, d'après des entretiens menés auprès de fermiers et

d'autres acteurs importants du milieu. Nous avons observé que la diminution du nombre d'installations de transformation provinciales et la réglementation peu adaptée sont des obstacles majeurs pour les éleveurs, sans compter que les systèmes de valorisation actuels comportent des incohérences. Ces problèmes persistent depuis plusieurs années et nécessitent une attention politique urgente. Nous concluons en discutant des solutions potentielles, telles que des abattoirs mobiles et le renforcement du soutien technique et commercial.

Introduction

The importance of meat protein in healthy diets and the current unsustainable state of global livestock production make it necessary to transition to alternative methods of livestock production. The consumption of meat offers benefits, including providing a whole protein source that is accessible in most climates, seasons, and areas, including those unsuitable for cropland (Henchion et al., 2017; Katz-Rosene, 2020; Ominski et al., 2021). However, the current globalized and industrial livestock production system is unsustainable by almost every metric; these include greenhouse gas emissions, land use change, biodiversity loss, animal and farm worker welfare, water consumption, fertilizer and pesticide use, and disease outbreaks, as well as social disconnection from food production (Clapp, 2023; Gerber et al., 2015; Weis, 2013; Willett et al., 2019). A transition towards alternative methods of livestock production could play an important role in addressing negative impacts of industrial livestock production. Alternative livestock systems are characterized by short supply chains, improved environmental outcomes, improved animal welfare, and retention of more

economic value for farmers (Genest-Richard et al., 2025; Gwin, 2009; National Farmers Union, 2016; Vignola et al., 2015). At the farm and ecosystem levels, alternative livestock systems transition away from the use of feedlots and the purchase of feed and turn instead towards practices of pasturing, rotational grazing, and biodynamic systems that generate value based on positive feedback cycles rather than external inputs and off-site costs (Genest-Richard et al., 2025). However, due to the regionally adapted nature of alternative livestock farms and systems, they are difficult to characterize beyond describing various practices that farmers select from to solve their problems and suit their own needs. For example, farmers engaged in our study mentioned growing and storing their own hay or silage and taking part in rotational grazing and pasturing to feed their livestock; these practices can also help to avoid unpredictable and high feed costs. To support this transition further, policy barriers hindering alternative livestock production must be examined and addressed.

This Perspective paper examines the feasibility of alternative livestock farming in the Kingston, Frontenac,

Lennox, and Addington (KFL&A) region of southeastern Ontario. This region has suitable soils for livestock production, plenty of fresh water, and population centres located relatively close to rural communities. We draw upon interviews conducted with seven farmers, one local abattoir, and one food policy expert within the KFL&A region.

Interviews took place between January and early March of 2024, prior to a devastating fire in June 2024 that burned down one of the provincial abattoirs in the region. Therefore, while the effects of this fire on the community were surely devastating, they are not captured in this study. The producers interviewed in our study do not meet industrial volume requirements for processing in larger federal facilities and thus rely entirely on provincial processing facilities. Among the farms

included in the study, cattle were the most common livestock raised for sale, followed by pigs, lamb and goat, and poultry. Selling at the farm gate was the most frequently utilized point of sale, with larger producers finding more value in selling at local farmers' markets.

This paper discusses the impacts of decades of government policies supporting industrial livestock production on alternative livestock farmers and on the status of infrastructure in the KFL&A region. Many of the challenges we identify are also experienced by producers in this sector across Ontario and Canada. We consider how farmers, livestock processors, and consumers can work together to generate social and economic value in alternative livestock networks.

Abattoir access as a limiting factor for rural livelihoods

Years of provincial and federal policies favouring industrial- and export-focussed livestock farming have left alternative farmers in a very difficult position. Studies across Canada have documented how improperly scaled regulations have exacerbated the decline of provincially licensed and inspected abattoirs and created favourable conditions for industrial livestock production to dominate (Barter, 2014; Charlebois & Summan, 2014; Costa, 2021; Gwin & Thiboumery, 2013; Miewald et al., 2015; National Farmers Union, 2021; Richardson, 2022). As a result, many have called for urgent policy reforms to promote sustainable rural livelihoods in this sector. For example, a notable transition occurred in Ontario following the sweeping *Food Safety and Quality Act* of 2001 (Barter, 2014). This represents one of the most significant changes since the 1962 *Meat Inspection Act* was

introduced; it included the adoption of the Hazard and Critical Control Point (HACCP) food safety system which eliminated previous exemptions to food safety standards and drastically increased enforcement and auditing in provincially licensed meat plants (Barter, 2014). Barter (2014) and Charlebois and Summan (2014) found that smaller abattoirs struggled with requirements for intensive documentation as well as new facilities and equipment. There has been a notable decline in the number of provincially licensed abattoirs in Ontario over the past two decades, from 183 facilities in 2005 to 142 facilities in 2012, and as of 2025 there are only 100 provincially licensed facilities for all of Ontario (Charlebois & Summan, 2014; Government of Ontario, 2025a). In addition to this dramatic reduction in numbers, the remaining facilities are mostly located in south-central Ontario, leaving many northern and

rural communities without any provincially licensed processing options. Some participants in our study similarly described difficulties with record keeping and an increasingly complex bureaucracy as key challenges for smaller facilities.

Overall, the main livelihood challenges identified by farmers in our study were burdensome travel distance to abattoirs and lack of processing options. Animal products are generally not ready for pickup on the same day as the animals are delivered, meaning that farmers must drive to and from the abattoir twice. An abattoir one hour away—a typical distance for those in the KFL&A region—therefore results in four hours of driving. Since the 2024 fire at the processing facility in Yarker, the closest facilities for farmers in the KFL&A region are those in Picton, Tweed, or Athens (Government of Ontario, 2025b). Long travel times can also impact animal welfare, and a lack of processing options can leave farmers stuck if processing quality decreases. Travel is even more problematic for poultry processing, with many participants reporting that the lack of nearby poultry abattoirs completely prevents poultry production in the region. Participants indicated that these barriers prevent current farmers from growing their production and limit new entrants to the sector. This is particularly concerning because poultry is one of the most accessible forms of livestock for new farmers to raise.

All participants felt strongly that expanding current facilities or opening a new abattoir would significantly benefit producers in the region. Farmers reported selling out of their products each year, indicating that consumer demand is present. Unfortunately, prospects for opening a new abattoir in the region that can support alternative producers are poor. The seasonality of alternative livestock production, expense of

processing equipment and facilities, high costs of keeping licenced inspectors on site, and potentially lower weights of animals raised in pastoral systems all make opening and running a new abattoir difficult (Barter, 2014; National Farmers Union, 2021). Some participants were involved in previous community-led efforts to open a new abattoir in the region which fell through due to high costs and difficulty finding a suitable location.

Some participants suggested that low-volume mobile abattoirs operated by licensed inspectors out of existing facilities could be a solution, particularly for smaller producers. One of the older farmers remembered a time when mobile abattoirs operated in the region and described the efficiency they offered for smaller batches of poultry. In a livestock processing policy review, the National Farmers Union (2021) found that on-site slaughter and mobile abattoirs can meet processing regulations, reduce transport times, and significantly improve animal welfare in provinces where they are currently used (also see Pinkney, 2014). Gibson and Epprecht (2017) similarly suggested that a mobile slaughterhouse may revitalize foodways in the rural area of Haliburton, Ontario. The mobile abattoir solution would alleviate initial costs for facilities and difficulties finding a suitable location as they can co-exist with the current processing and regulatory framework and are more easily scalable based on demand. Finding and training operators would necessarily be a priority, but this could be accomplished with the support of existing facilities and abattoir professionals. While it may not be a long-term solution for a full transition to alternative livestock farming, this could help alleviate current stresses and, over time, encourage sufficient growth in alternative production to support a permanent facility.

Finding value in alternative livestock farming

The financial difficulties of alternative livestock production were felt by all participants in our study. Alternative livestock producers face land-access challenges, difficulties finding trained farm workers, labour costs associated with attending farmers' markets, and high costs of any relevant equipment and feed when required. Processors rely on a dwindling number of producers, high seasonal demand, and very high facility and equipment costs. Addressing the root financial difficulties of livestock farming is essential to ensuring that local food production can grow.

Years of competing with low costs of food production in industrial systems have left farmers in the alternative livestock sector undervalued for their labour. Finding economic value in farming was frequently mentioned during interviews; for example, cutting hayfields versus pastorally grazing them, finding the best combinations of methods and locations for selling their products, organic certification, travel times, and whether government farming programs were worth the time spent applying to them were all economic decisions farmers had to weigh. To help alleviate financial stress and uncertainty, most producers or their family members worked a non-farm job to make a livable income, helping the household to maintain a farming lifestyle. This is the reality for many farmers across Canada who increasingly rely on off-farm sources for a growing proportion of their income (National Farmers Union, 2024). Despite selling out of their products each year, farmers still expressed concerns about how lack of consumer reliability makes forecasting and planning for growth difficult. Consumers are not bound to buy products in the same way that processors need farmers and vice versa. If interest or value calculations for consumers change, and in the absence of any other ties to farmers, consumers

can shop at grocery stores where meat is typically always available. This struggle for reliability in alternative food systems is summarized well by Mount (2012), who states that “an alternative identity must go beyond brand loyalty and product quality. It must stake out territory, spaces and bonds that cannot be replicated through conventional food chains” (p. 112). While improving the state of processing infrastructure alone may not achieve this, it is certainly a necessary step in creating a thriving system where novel bonds and connections can be formed. These findings indicate a need for strong commitment among all actors—including both producers and consumers—in an alternative food system and highlight the value of personal connections and social engagement between groups.

Across Canada in recent years, farmers' markets and food hubs have been identified as key mechanisms for helping producers capture the full value of alternative products (Andrée et al., 2015; Beckie et al., 2012; Warsaw et al., 2021). In the KFL&A region, a recent study by the City of Kingston (2023) described strong interest in alternative food networks among citizens, with the most popular being farmers' markets. However, most farmers interviewed in this study expressed that the stall costs, time, and travel costs of attending farmers' markets made selling from a farm gate more economical and appealing. Participants were aware of several strong markets in the region. The Kingston Memorial Centre Farmers' Market and Harvest Hastings were held in high regard by participants for preventing reselling and promoting local food producers. Farmers' markets and clustering activities have been noted to increase consumer awareness, promote knowledge sharing, and add to the social value of alternative food systems (Beckie et al.,

2012). However, with most farmers in our study choosing not to attend markets or other clustering activities despite being aware of the potential benefits, methods of supporting food system growth remain a dilemma. This resonates with the findings of Kupke and Page (2015) in *Does the Farmer Want a Market?*, which suggest that any solutions to finding economic and social value in products while growing the alternative food system must be done gradually and must encompass more diverse marketing outlets than exclusively farmers' markets. It is imperative that, in

scaling alternative food systems, they do not begin to mimic the industrial production systems they seek to replace (Beckie, & Connely, 2016; Mount, 2012). Notably, scaling up to current industrial levels of meat production is both unlikely and unnecessary; consumers in industrialized countries currently consume much more meat than is nutritionally recommended or necessary (Weis, 2013; Willett et al., 2019). If healthier meat consumption practices become more widespread, the burden of meeting production needs could decrease dramatically.

Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, the state of alternative livestock production in the KFL&A region is tenuous due to limited existing processing capacity and social disconnect between producers and consumers. These challenges are indicative of broader trends of consolidation and regulatory barriers facing this sector across the country. With high costs of increasing local processing capacity, a mobile processing solution could help expand existing processing operations in a lower-risk way. Provincial and municipal governments should consult producers and processors to establish appropriate regulations and funding for mobile abattoir studies. In the short term, municipal or provincial funding for pilot projects could offer a concrete way for local governments to support local food system resiliency without tackling difficult zoning and location issues related to establishing a permanent facility. Government-funded abattoir worker training programs would also be an important component.

Alongside enhanced processing capacity, supporting local awareness and marketing initiatives is critical to re-establishing the social and physical place of locally produced food and increasing the “value” of consumer

participation in local food systems (Connely & Beckie, 2016; Feagan, 2007). Promotion of local branding, seasonal products, local farm tours, and regional cooking methods to local communities could contribute to alleviating the disconnect between supermarket prices and the true costs of food production (Feagan, 2007; Weis, 2013). Studies have shown that consumers are willing to pay more for livestock products raised using more sustainable practices (Gwin et al., 2012; Hartmann & Siegrist, 2017).

While farmers' markets are an effective way to establish links between consumers and producers, they require a significant commitment, especially among farmers (Kupke & Page, 2015). A more diversified approach that incorporates other direct marketing methods like farm gate sales may receive more support from producers. As well, creating engagement between producers and institutional buyers such as hospitals, schools, and municipalities could help to provide steady demand that producers can more easily plan for (Friedmann, 2007; Gwin & Thiboumery, 2013). For farmers, establishing technical support for building an

online presence or maintaining local farm and product databases for consumers can also be useful. Ultimately, increasing knowledge and awareness among all food

system actors is critical to mitigating the harmful effects of industrial livestock production and transitioning towards alternative livestock systems.

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